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Was Watergate Really Such A Big Deal?

*It was a summer's evening,
Old Kasper's work was done,
And he before his cottage door
Was sitting in the sun;
And by him sported on the green,
His little grandchild Wilhelmine.
Peterkin came to ask what he had found
That was so large, and smooth, and
Round . . .
" 'Tis some poor fellow's skull, said he
Who fell in the great victory . . .
But what they fought each other for,
I could not well make out. . . ."
"And everybody praised the Duke,
Who this great fight did win."
"But what good came of it at last?"
Quoth little Peterkin.
"Why that I cannot tell," said he;
"But 'twas a famous victory."*

LOS ANGELES—When I told my two college student assistants, Juliette Capretta and Vicki Stewart, that I was going to write something to mark the 10th anniversary of Watergate, each one looked at me with her big brown eyes and said, "What was that?" as if I were mentioning one of my usual "brano" teasers on them, like "prohibition" or "Iwo Jima."

But after a few minutes of talking to them, I realized that I was learning the lesson—as usual. Because when I tried to tell them what Watergate was about, I became like Old Kasper in Southey's "Battle of Blenheim." Try as I might, I could not say what it was about.

As I have made my way around the city by car and the nation by phone, I find that my problem is not unique. Really, who now knows what Watergate was about. What was all the shouting about?

It has been 10 years. Temperatures in Washington that August were as hot inside the air-conditioned halls of the Capitol and the nation's great newspapers as they were on the sidewalks. A committee of the House of Representatives had voted to impeach a president for only the second time in history. There were dark rumors of the president's putting troops and tanks around the White House. There were smoking guns and conspiracies and resignations and heroes who broke the news.

But after all this time, who can say what was going on? We know who bombed Pearl Harbor after 43 years. We know who shot John F. Kennedy after 20 years. Most of us know what the Depression was after 55 years. But it has only been 10 years since Richard Nixon resigned, and who knows why he had to do it?

Really, after we say that Watergate was the name of an office building where there was a burglary, what do we know of the storm that followed? Could it have been about a president who lied? Surely not, because presidents are still lying, about what their tax cuts do to the working man, about why U.S. Marines get blown to bits in their sleep. Even presidential candidates lie openly about what their fathers did, what their names are, and why they were in the military. Even vice presidential candidates lie about where their money comes from and who their husband's business associates are.

Could it have been because he spied on his campaign opponent? Surely not, because one of the most loved president of modern times had his opponent's most secret campaign briefing books, and no one says "boo." Could it have been that he misused the CIA? Again, not possibly, since after him, the CIA was sent to wage se-

cret wars and unseat governments, and no one asks for impeachment now.

But it was a famous victory, surely. It proved the strength of our investigative journalists. It showed "the system worked." But now, in the light of time, who, who in a hundred million, can say what any *one* revelation of any Washington Post article was? Bernstein and Woodward have grown great and rich from their work, and they deserve it as much as Cher does, but what did they do? What was one bombshell they exposed? What was one threat to the republic that they caught just in time? What did it show about investigative journalism except that reporters can become stars, too, just like used-car salesmen? After all this short decade, what sticks to the ribs as something they did that was heroic?

But, finally, the system worked. That positively was what Watergate proved. Satisfied now, little Peterkin?

Yes, but how did it prove the system worked? If whatever Nixon did was so obscure that no one can even remember what he did any longer, if it is shrouded in the mists of forgetting after only 10 years, how drastic could it have been?

More to the point, if we cannot even remember what Richard Nixon's crimes were, why did we kick him out? If he didn't do anything memorably terrible, how could the system possibly have worked by removing him from office? In the retrospect of 10 years, it all looks more as if the system did *not* work. If the nation chased a president out of office for the only time in 200 years *and no one clearly remembers why*, something went drastically wrong, not drastically right.

But perhaps even that is beside the point. Perhaps the only point now is that everyone has forgotten. Richard Nixon is respected again, at least in influential quarters. The press is back to reporting about man bites dog. The relentless wars between the free and the unfree go on at the margins of each as they will until one side exists no more.

When my Valley Girls ask me why I have a file of letters from Bob Haldeman or how I got my shiny White House cuff links, I will no longer even try to tell them what happened. No one knows, and no one remembers any longer, after all, except that it was a famous victory.

Benjamin J. Stein, a Hollywood writer and producer, was a speechwriter for presidents Nixon and Ford, specializing in economic and transportation issues.